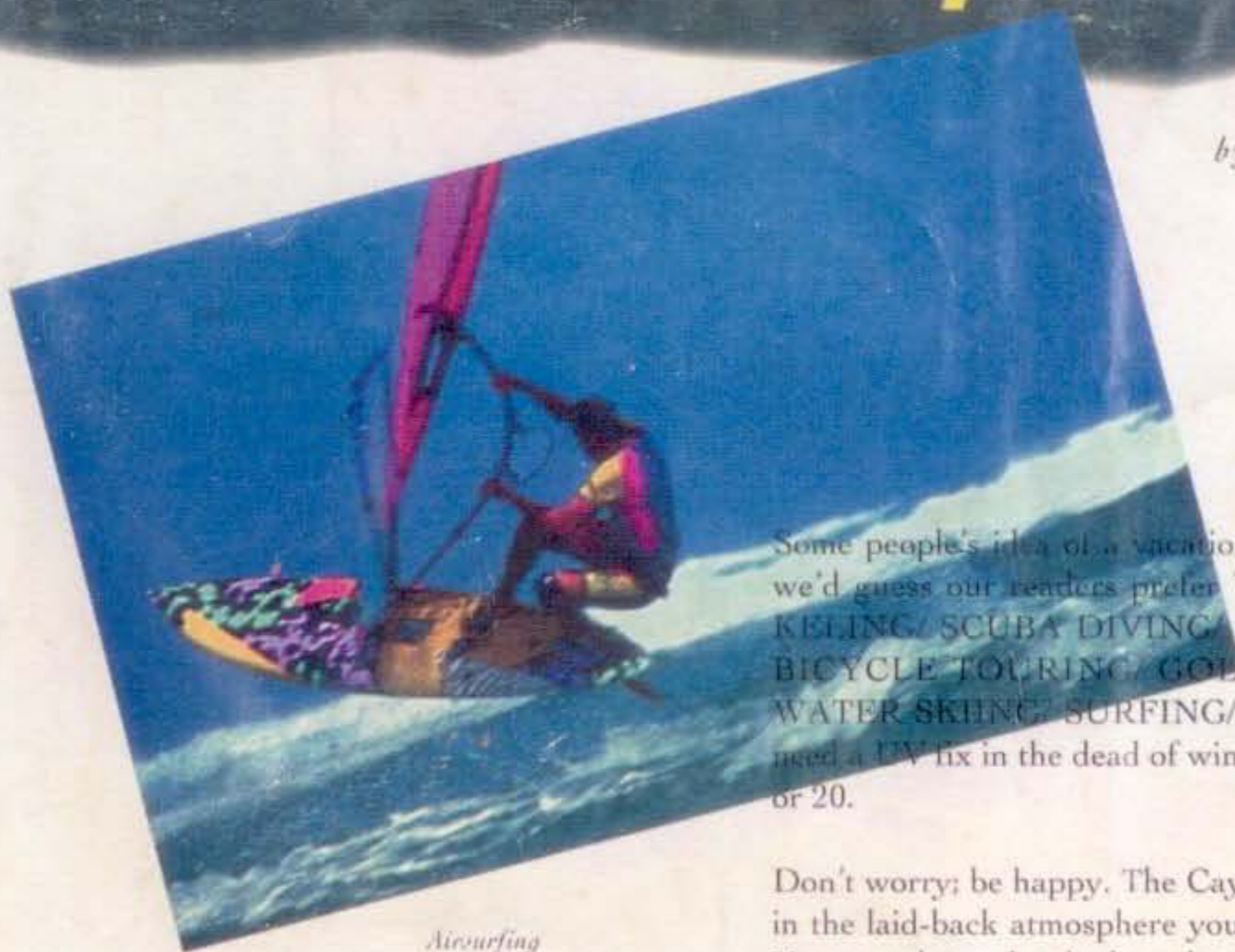


# Grand Cayman

*gorgeous beyond...*

# expectation

*by Mike Fick*



*Air surfing  
in the  
Caymans*

Some people's idea of a vacation is vegetating, eating, and sleeping 24 hours a day. But we'd guess our readers prefer WINDSURFING/ CATAMARAN SAILING/ SNORKELING/ SCUBA DIVING/ PARTYING/ PARASAILING/ CARBO-LOADING/ BICYCLE TOURING/ GOLF/ TENNIS/ OCEAN KAYAKING/ JET-SKIING/ WATER SKIING/ SURFING/ FISHING from dawn 'til midnight. Or maybe you just need a FW fix in the dead of winter, and want to decide each morning whether you feel 80 or 20.

Don't worry; be happy. The Cayman Islands will fill all your vacation cards top to bottom in the laid-back atmosphere you'd hoped to find on those other tropical island vacations. You can choose by the hour between modest, occasional throngs on the populous western end of Grand Cayman Island and the empty expanses of the barely touched eastern end, all surrounded by some of the finest scuba and snorkel diving in the world.

Two bags of salted peanuts south of Miami, just past Cuba, the Cayman Islands have wonderful, friendly people and an ideal winter climate. How about 70 at dawn, 80s all day, breezy and clear 24 hours a day, the world's clearest salt water, and 80 degree water temperature year-round? Let's tantalize you with the sailing opportunities first, then look into the lodging, food, and other activities.

## EVER BEEN AIRSURFING?

Windsurfing there is gorgeous beyond expectation, and a little eerie. Sailing along looking straight down, you feel you're at the peak of a logo-high jump, wearing blue-tinted sunglasses. Your shadow skims the white sandy bottom below you, occasionally distorted by a patch of nappy turtle grass or a coral outcropping surrounded by aquarium fish. Some fish fly up to greet you in your world; most prefer you enter their world to meet them face-to-mask.

Many square miles of this air-clear, shallow, light blue water await you at a variety of launch sites. We'll introduce you to a few of them, and you can choose whether to scurry around sailing all over Grand Cayman or to stroll 200 feet from your bed to a complete range of pre-rigged gear 50 feet from the best windsurfing on the island.

## ENOUGH DRIVEL; HOW'S THE WIND?

The best site for the vast majority of windsurfing visitors is at the east end, past the village of East End (where do they get these names?!). There the standard issue wind is straight onshore at 15-25 miles per hour, all day, three to four days per week from November through March. This can blow into April and sometimes May in a good year. Summertime sailing is for those who like tropical heat and 10-kt breezes.

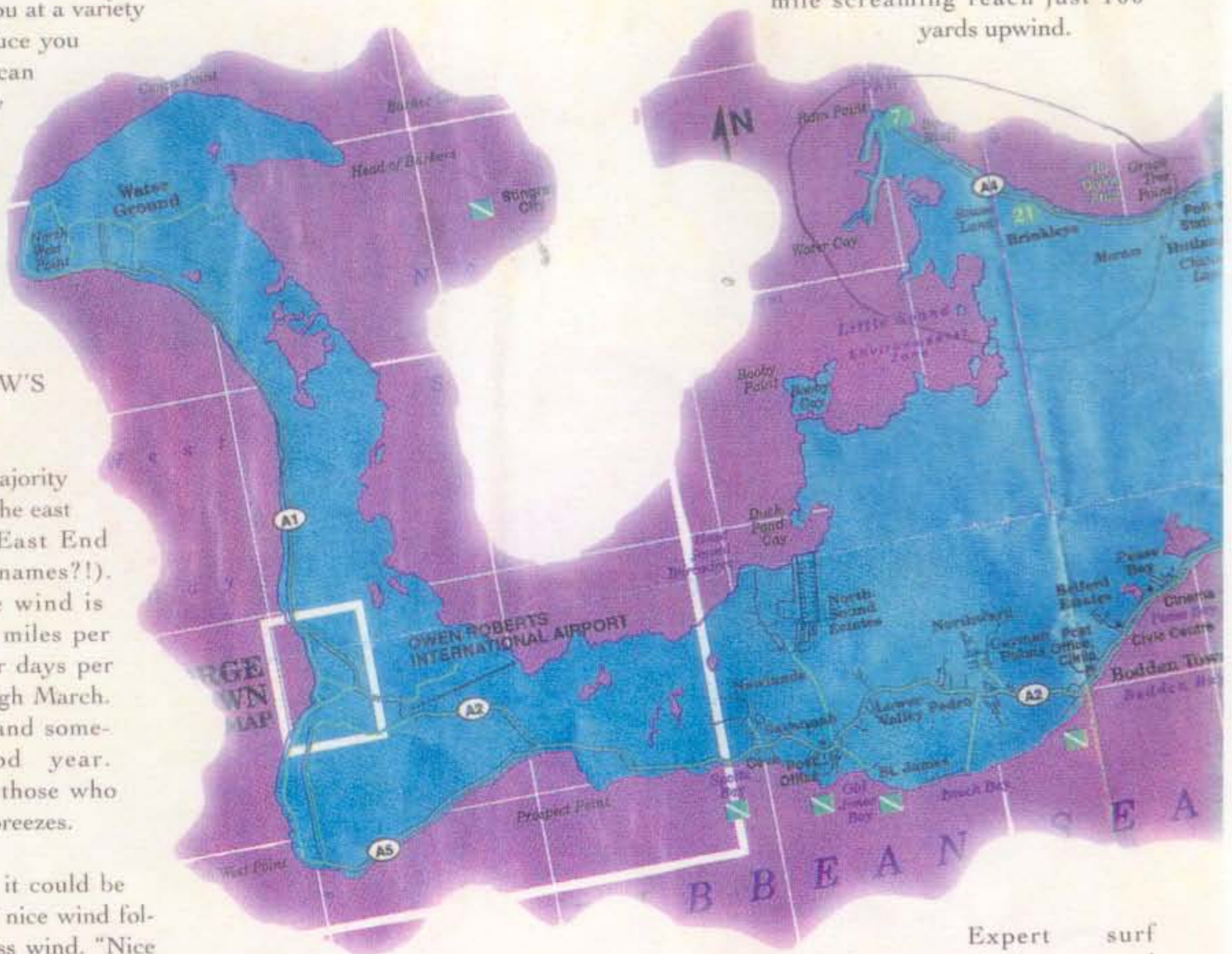
If there is a wind pattern, it could be described as 40-60 hours of nice wind followed by 30-40 hours of less wind. "Nice wind" is usually 5•0 to 6•0, sometimes 4•5; "less wind" is 8-12 mph. The nice-wind sessions generally start before dawn and last a couple of days and nights. Less-wind periods seldom last more than two days in the winter. Many nice-wind days will be 5•5 at dawn, 5•0 by late morning, and may drop off to 6•0 by mid-afternoon. You can sometimes plane on an 8'8" as long as the sun's up, stopping only to plug in a different sail and rotate your food.



The Tortuga Club pool and neighborhood. You'd like it.

Weather forecasting is an individual, real-time sport; if the wind strength suits your needs you choose whether to sail.

enough chop for a little hopping on a 5•0 day. On a light-wind day, throw snorkeling gear over your shoulder and cruise the whole area on a longboard (remember those big 12' things with a plank stuck down through a hole in the middle?). When you see a coral head reaching up from the sand bottom, jump off, tie up or anchor, and check out the brilliantly colored fish suspended in mid-air ... er ... mid-water. This lagoon is especially inviting to mixed couples — those pairing expert and beginning sailors. The beginner can learn the basics in friendly on-shore winds and flat water right in front of the condo while the expert rips back and forth on a 4-mile screaming reach just 100 yards upwind.



## AND HOW'S THE SAILING?

The reef a half-mile offshore stops all the ocean swell, providing a half-mile-wide, 4-mile reach of flat, crystal-clear, blue water from 2-15 feet deep. Reach to your left from the launch and you encounter smooth, modest, jumpable swell entering through a break in the reef. The three-plus miles to your right are flat water, with just

Expert surf sailors can exit the protected shallow area into the open ocean for a little more excitement. Well, a lot more excitement; the reef opening off to the left includes strong two-way currents, waves breaking back-to-back from several directions, and sharp coral and rock boundaries. Do it only with the counsel of local experts and only with your own gear or explicit rental vendor permission.

Safer open ocean access is available around the corner. The empty, sandy north shore usually has starboard side-shore to side-on wind, and in spots the reef has gaps with good-to-excellent, long, peeling breakers wrapping in from the reef a hundred yards offshore. Beyond the breakers lie open-ocean swells 5-12 feet high. Ask the locals about Old Man Bay, sometimes called Dead Man's Religion.

## OR TAKE YOUR ADVENTURE LIGHTLY

Further west on the north side is 5x6-mile North Sound, with full wind exposure and still more clear blue 10-foot-deep water. Launch with the locals into onshore winds at Morgan's Harbour and sail all over the Sound, buying lunch at beautiful Rum Point 7 miles away. The Sound offers decent swell and chop on a windy day, or gentle small swell on a cruising

experts such as Kirk, Howie, and George. Howie goes both ways (i.e., he's also a surfer).

Next is the west shore and beautiful Seven-Mile Beach, populated with condos, restaurants, and cruise-ship tourists. The normally offshore wind there offers the speed-sailor's paradox: mirror-flat water with light and gusty winds near shore; stronger, steadier wind but choppier water further offshore. There's no reef here to catch sailors unable to return upwind to shore.

In the middle of Seven-Mile Beach you'll find Sailboards Caribbean, a large, well-equipped Mistral sailing center owned by San Diego emigrant Jay Henderson. Jay is an excellent instructor who caters to beginners and experts alike. His rental program ensures you will be charged only for on-the-water time. How's that for a no-wind guarantee? But a no-wind guarantee can't beat actual wind, so as The Cars said, "Drive".

## GO EAST, THE MAN SAID

Drive 40 minutes east from Seven-Mile Beach and you're back to the east end. You'll want to stay at the east end's only lodging, Morritt's Tortuga Club, where beginners, intermediates, and many experts will find the best windsurfing in the prevailing winds.

Call Morritt's well in advance, and ask for the windsurfing package rate. That cuts your lodging rate by 50%. You should be able to get an efficiency for \$85 a day. All their facilities, from efficiencies to pent-houses, are sparkling new, with complete and completely equipped kitchens, air conditioning, cable TV, etc. The Tortuga Club offers a minimal Continental breakfast, expensive pool-side snacks for lunch, and a full, excellent restaurant menu evenings. Deck chair potatoes can probably get enough to eat at Morritt's; active sportsmen will want to drive a ways to stock up their kitchens or sample a variety of restaurants to fuel their activities. Because many guests are pool-side loungers, the beach and sea are never crowded.

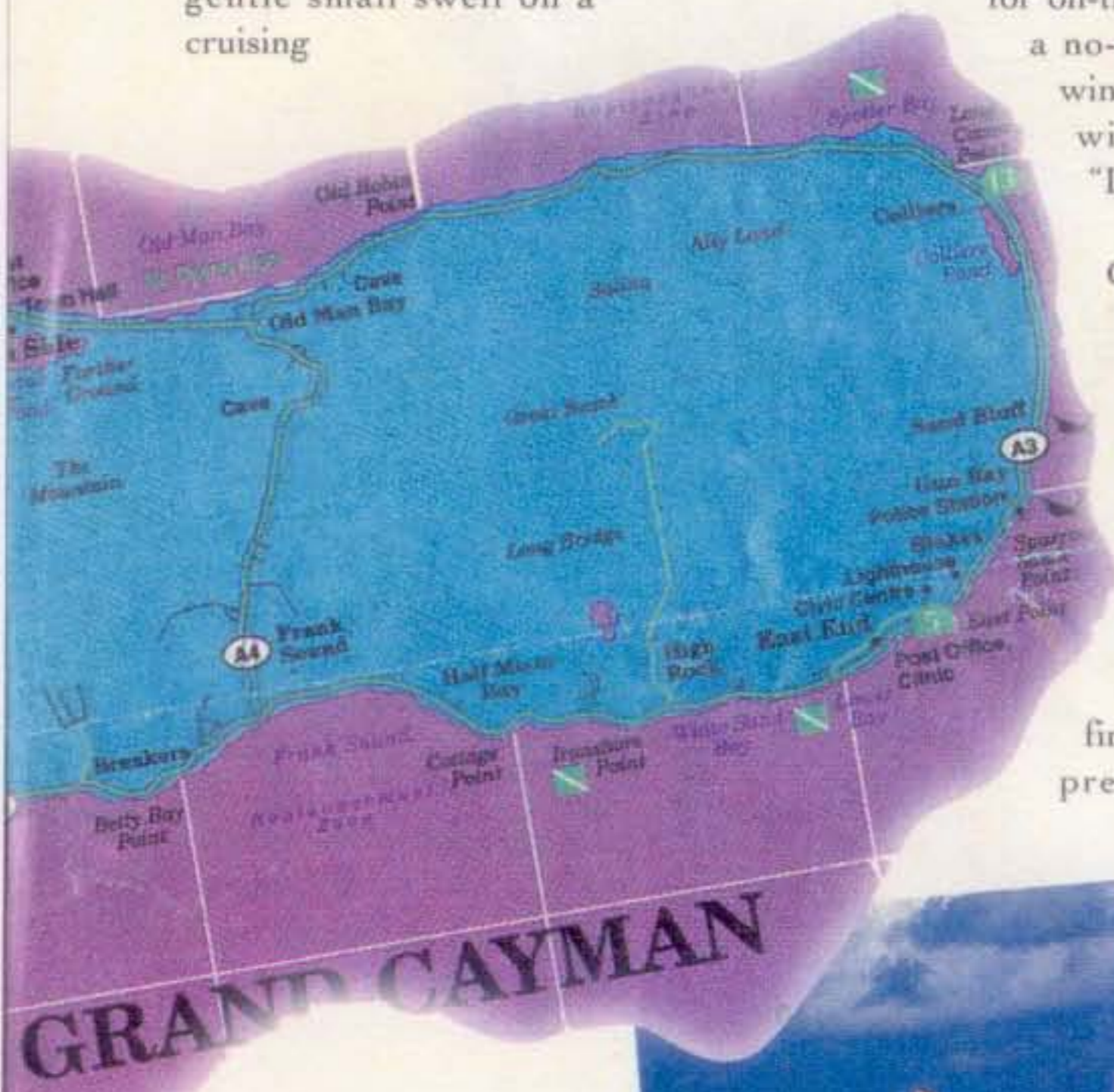
## BYOB?

Bring your own board only if you really enjoy schlepping tons of stuff on vacations. Just reserve lodging at Morritt's, then call Cayman Windsurfing (CW) on Morritt's beach to reserve your windsurfing gear, and travel light. CW is a Bic Destination Center; you can grab (and will use in a typical week) anything from 8'6" high-wind slalom gear to 12' longboards for cruising around with your snorkeling gear. Most of their gear is new Bic boards and new UP slalom and wave-slalom sails from 4•0 up. They have good Bic and UP slalom booms, and are adding more surf-quality booms as visitors' sailing abilities and interests escalate. They also have ocean kayaks, ultra-quiet 1993 Yamaha Waverunners, a Hobie Cat, snorkeling gear, and other toys. You'll have to bring your own surfboard.

## TAKE SOME ACCESSORIES, THOUGH

It's off-season at home; your hands will be putty. Take sailing gloves or face the bloody consequences. Bring booties because of the occasional coral heads and gravel two feet down. Bring a harness. You won't need to bring any sails unless you are a hard-

core surf sailor requiring soft sails. And unless you work outdoors naked on the equator, bring sunblock, serious sunglasses and a sailing hat. Long-sleeved Lycra shirts are great protection from sun and harness rash. Unless you arrive with a major tan, you must choose between look-



day. Surrounded by populated land and capped by the reef upwind, it's a marvelous place to roam for miles on a slalom board without risk.

On the northwest corner of Grand Cayman, near Pappagallo, is side-shore surfsailing with a little more risk. We're going to make you ask locals how to find these launch sites; some are tricky to find and warrant obtaining local advice first. Chris Narborough of Cayman Windsurfing can advise you and put you in touch with local



Another crowded day on the water.

Morritt's is a beautiful, new, full-service resort on one of the island's most beautiful beaches, with first-rate windsurfing and scuba diving services right on the premises.

ing like a geek or cooking like a lobster if you sail all day. Which is tougher — your ego or your skin? The Caribbean sun is extreme even in January, yet a neoprene shorty feels good at dawn (assuming you're sailing).

#### IF YOU'RE BORED, IT'S YOUR FAULT

And that's just the windsurfing. But a couple of days a week even a 7.0 will leave big guys schlogging, so you'll have to enjoy any of the 20-30 other major activities the Caymans offer. The literature is full of them, from research submarine dives 800 feet down The Wall to snuggling with wild three-foot North Sound sting rays the way a child rolls around with golden retriever puppies. The CW crew are eager and informed advisors for all the other activities and facilities you may want to enjoy on the islands. They can point you towards the lively but not raucous night life, the best restaurants, and the cheapest restaurants.

The reef surrounding most of Grand Cayman is the major divider between the idyllic beauty and safety most tropical island vacationers seek and the ocean adventure others want. It caters to a very broad mix of travelers. It is a shallow, natural coral wall around all but the west end of the island. It's perfectly safe and quite interesting to swim, snorkel, walk, kayak, or sail right up to it in most areas. It includes colorful coral formations housing beautiful tropical fish and an occasional wreck or artifact.

The adventurous outer side of the reef is called The Wall. It drops — sometimes vertically — to 17,000 feet. It adds some of the sensations of skydiving to the sights and thrills of scuba diving in a living art gallery. The first 8' moray eel you see peer-

ing at you from a hole in The Wall is a little startling, until you look straight down into the three-miles-deep, dark void beneath you and regain some perspective. Non-divers can take a resort diving lesson in the morning and scuba dive in shallower water that afternoon. All divers will experience some of the finest diving on the planet.

#### THE REST IS DETAILS

To paraphrase an old "Surfer" magazine ad, "Windsurfing is Life; the Rest is Details". Sooner or later we have to take care of business and find out how to get there, get

you do will be voluntary. The only exception is in private homes towards the east end, where the water supply consists of rain water drained off the roof into a pool enclosed beneath the house. They call it a cistern; we'd call it a flooded basement. They drink bottled water, and use the cistern water for everything else. This place is quaint, man.

You may want to get indoors for 15 minutes around dusk and dawn to avoid the few hardy stragglers that survive the island's extensive and successful mosquito suppression program. These guys wear medium-size T-shirts that say, "My Parents Honeymooned at Chernobyl".

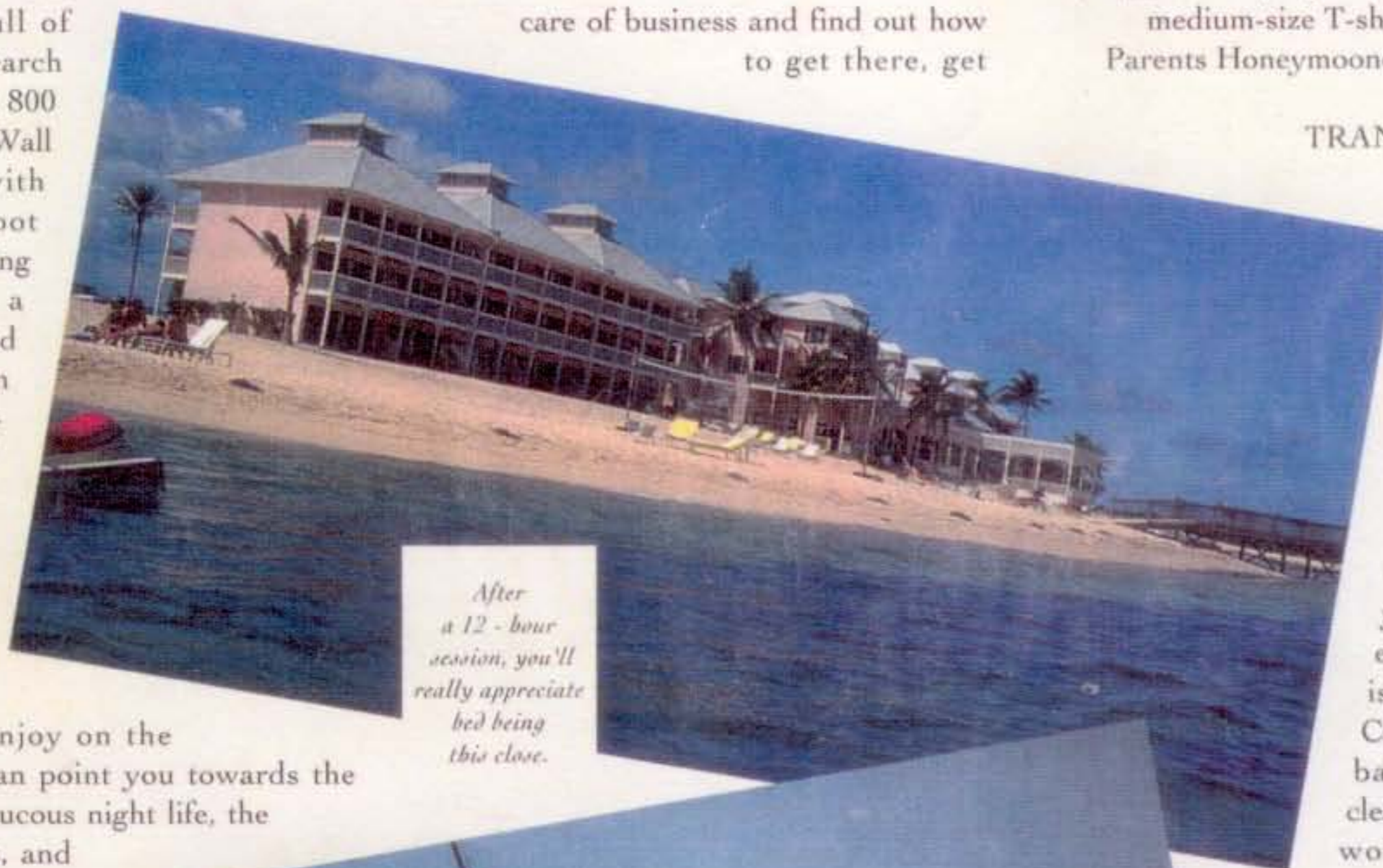
#### TRANSPORTATION

To get there, fly. It's a hell of a swim and Castroland blocks the beam reach from Miami.

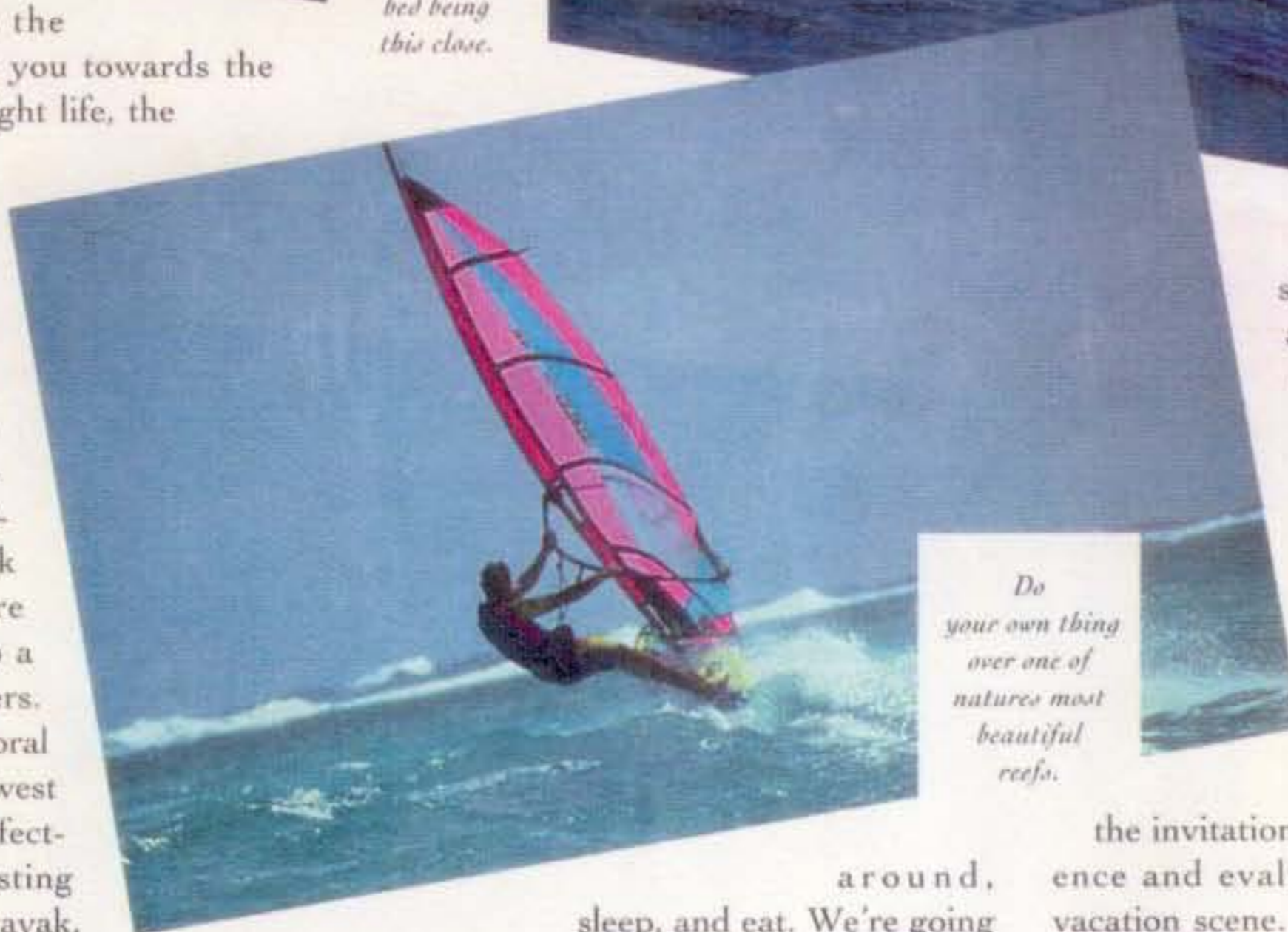
Rent a vehicle if you want to enjoy the whole island (you do!). Considering the balmy temps and clear skies, a Jeep is worth the extra expense over a rental car. You get more sights, sounds, atmosphere, and sailing spot versatility than a car offers. A sweat-shirt or windbreaker feels good driving around at night in your open Jeep.

THANK YOU,  
THANK YOU,  
THANK YOU

We greatly appreciate the invitation and opportunity to experience and evaluate the Cayman Islands vacation scene. Gracious support from the Cayman Islands Department of Tourism, Morrill's Tortuga Club, Red Sail Sports, and Cayman Windsurfing and its eager-to-please crew, Bruno, Peter, and Conrad, made it all possible and made it the great experience it was. Special thanks to our hosts Avril Brophy and corporate attorney/Cayman Windsurfing owner Chris Narborough. They were outstanding hosts, great spokesmen for Cayman life and activities, and superb entertainers. We



*After a 12-hour session, you'll really appreciate bed being this close.*



*Do your own thing over one of nature's most beautiful reefs.*

around, sleep, and eat. We're going to assume your primary reason for going to the Caymans is windsurfing, and bias our information in that direction. Your chief challenge in pursuing the other recreations will be squeezing them in around the wind.

With the 25% exchange rate working against us, food prices are high and drinks higher yet. Every restaurant we tried had excellent food. We drank the water everywhere with no regrets; the only running